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RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA PRIORITY 6161
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PRIORITY 5280
RUEHB/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES PRIORITY 1082
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ PRIORITY 1787
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 9995
RUEHMU/AMEMBASSY MANAGUA PRIORITY 1066
RUEHQ/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 1860
RUEHSN/AMEMBASSY SAN SALVADOR PRIORITY 0834
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/10/2016

TAGS: PGOV KDEM VE

SUBJECT: BRV REACTS TO EU OBSERVERS FINAL REPORT

REF: 05 CARACAS 03761

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT R. DOWNES FOR 1.4 (D)

Summary

¶1. (SBU) The EU international observation mission released its final report in Caracas on March 15. Observers met with government officials in advance to prepare them for the report. Government response has been relatively positive, although National Electoral Council President Jorge Rodriguez has pointed out several apparent inconsistencies between mission leader Jose Silva Peneda's public and private comments and the report. Pro-government media outlets have highlighted the report's criticism of the opposition's withdrawal and Peneda's comment that the media should help instill more confidence in the electoral system. Despite these measured remarks, we do not rule out a more heated response later, as occurred in December following the observers' preliminary report (reftel). End Summary.

EU Cites Distrust of CNE

¶2. (SBU) The EU electoral observation mission returned to Caracas March 9 to present its final report. Mission leaders privately presented the report to the National Electoral Council (CNE) and Vice President Rangel March 13 and 14, respectively, before releasing it publicly March 15. (Note: Post received a courtesy copy March 14.) In its press conference, mission leader Jose Silva Peneda emphasized the "high level of distrust in the electoral process," which he said indicated the need to address significant structural issues beyond just a change in CNE directors. In response to several questions on the root causes for the current level of

political polarization, Peneda noted that "democracy is the responsibility of both sides." He also said that the opposition had as important a role in resolving electoral crisis as the government. When asked his reaction to BRV charges that the mission conspired with the USG and opposition forces to use the report to discredit the election, Peneda said he had "nothing particular to say," and noted that electoral missions always consult with various sectors of society and a variety of diplomatic missions.

Government Response Measured, for Now

¶3. (SBU) CNE President Jorge Rodriguez has taken the lead on the government's response, which has been relatively mild, so far, and focused more on the EU's press conference than the report itself. He said he was generally pleased with the report, but called his own press conference to complain "in the most constructive spirit possible" about the tone of the EU press conference and the media's focus on Peneda's statement about the lack of voter confidence. That said, Bolivarian sensitivity soon manifested itself. Rodriguez argued that Peneda's repeated point about distrust on March 15 contradicted the report and what he had said to the CNE two days before. He then played back excerpts of the remarks at the CNE in which Peneda congratulates the CNE for "working to preserve democracy amidst polarization and political pressure." Next, Rodriguez read selected quotes from the report that emphasize the soundness of the voting machines, which are described as conforming to "international standards for the most technically advanced machines." He further

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dismissed the comment about distrust, saying that polls were needed to determine Venezuelan attitudes not media commentary. Rodriguez said he had to speak out to balance out the private media's skewed coverage of the press conference and suggested that reporters take the report's recommendation to stop emitting biased information.

¶4. (C) EU EOM deputy leader Domenico Tuccinardi and EU diplomats told poloff the government's reaction in the private meetings was positive. CNE Director Sobella Mejias (protect) told PolCouns there had not been much discussion during the March 13 meeting. Mejias took issue with the mission's recommendation that the CNE invest more money into poll worker training and voter education, noting the millions of Bolivars that were spent on those areas during the last election. Voters had an opportunity to learn about voting procedures, she said, but did not take advantage of it because of the opposition's continuing uncertainty over whether to participate.

¶5. (SBU) Government-run media outlets have predictably played up the positive parts of the report and the press conference, particularly Peneda's quote that the machines are "the most advanced in the world." They have also frequently cited Peneda's alleged remark at the CNE March 13 that there was "no reason not to trust the electoral system," and the report's criticism of the opposition's pullout. In a dig at its pro-opposition competition, the media also cited Peneda's response to a Bolivarian News Agency (ABN) reporter that the press should help create more confidence in the CNE. No other high level officials have comment yet.

Comment

¶6. (C) Apart from a bit of defensiveness from Rodriguez, the government has responded mildly to the report, predictably playing up the favorable parts and using critical excerpts to dig at and distract its opponents. However, we do not discount the possibility of a more heated response once the government, particularly President Chavez, digests

the report, as occurred following the preliminary report's release last December (reftel).

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